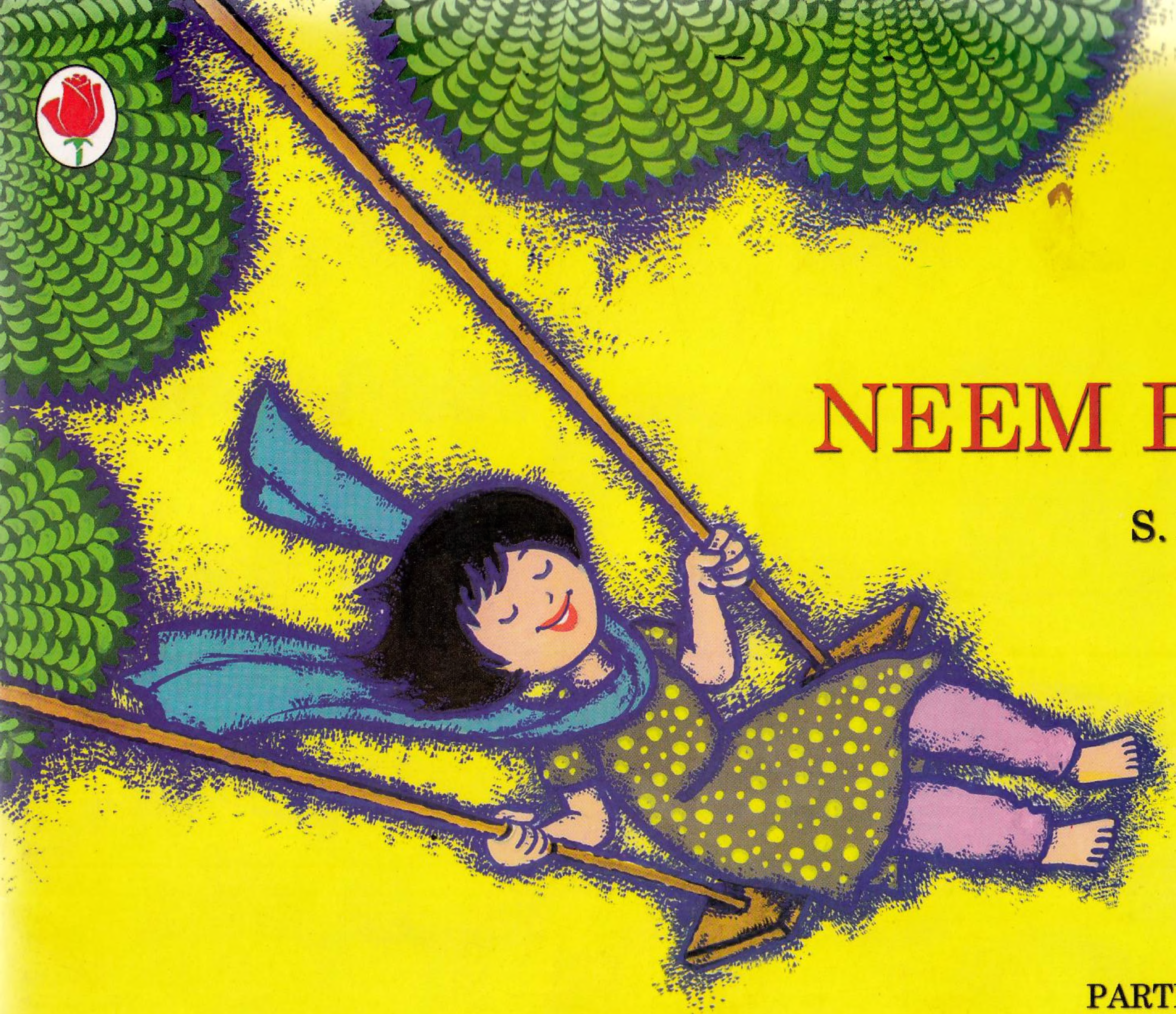




NEEM BABA

S. I. FAROOQI



Illustrations

PARTHA SENGUPTA



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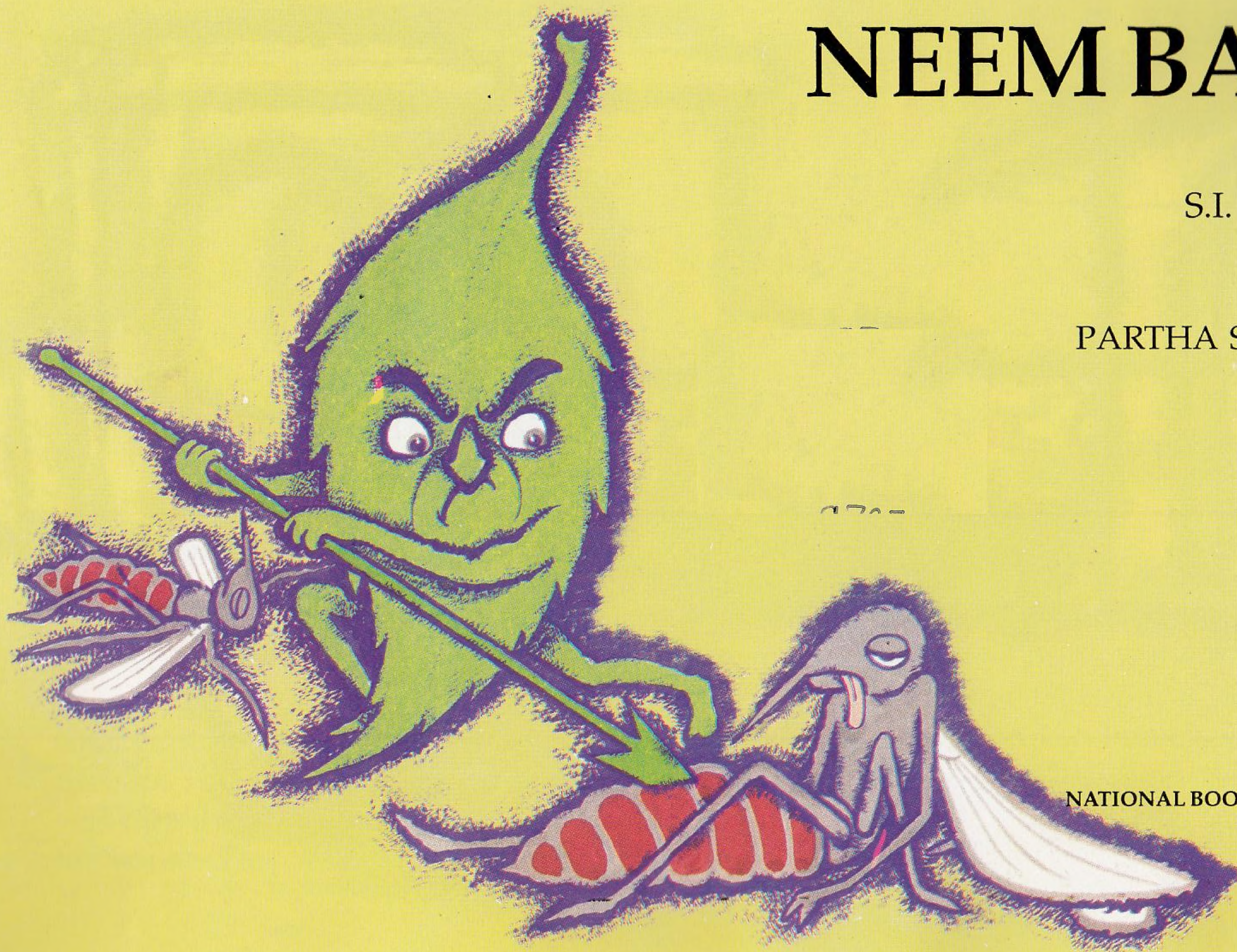
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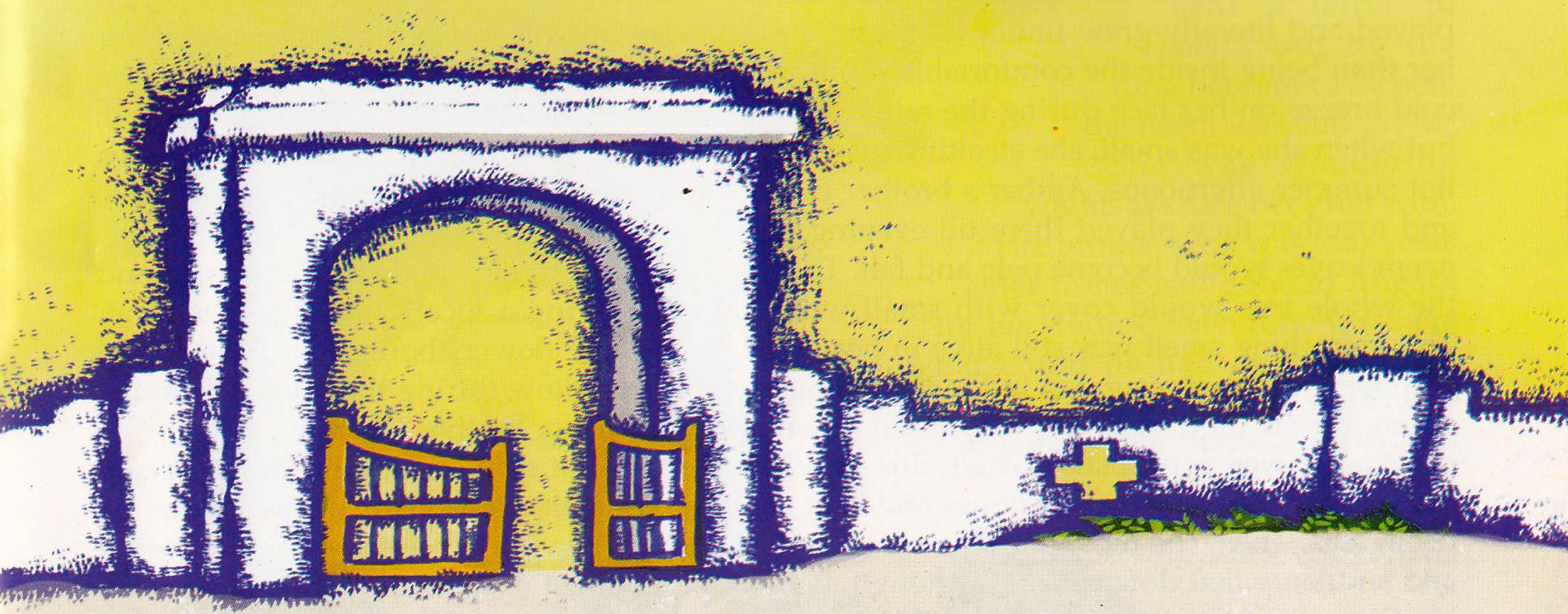
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On returning from school when Amber entered her house she was shocked and stunned for a while. Though the house had become more spacious and well lit now, there was deserted feeling in the atmosphere. She suddenly noticed that the huge neem tree was no more in the courtyard. The whole courtyard was full of fallen leaves and broken branches, which were perhaps cut while dragging the tree mercilessly. The area where the main tree once stood was dug deep and in fact, uprooted. However, one big branch was still lying in the corner of the house. This was perhaps retained by her mother to be used as fuel.

The house without the neem appeared quite dull. Tears rolled down her eyes. She loved her neem tree. Since her childhood she had seen that tree growing day by day. She had played and literally grew under it. Sitting under the neem was much more pleasurable for her than being inside the comfortable room. She loved swinging on the tree and having the cold breeze on her face during the rainy season. Although, she was now thirteen years old, but when she was small, she stealthily used to run outside the house with her brother in the hot summer afternoons. Amber's brother called on his classmate Rufi and her friend Geeta and together they played there till evening. Every year during December and January, the neem leaves would become pale and fall. Then, in March-April new buds would appear and the whole tree would cover with small white flowers, giving a nice fragrance all around. This refreshing smell was still alive in her mind. Soon these flowers bore small fruits called Nobolies, which were green in the beginning but turned yellow during the rains. When the strong breeze blew, nobolies would fall down and were eaten by the children.

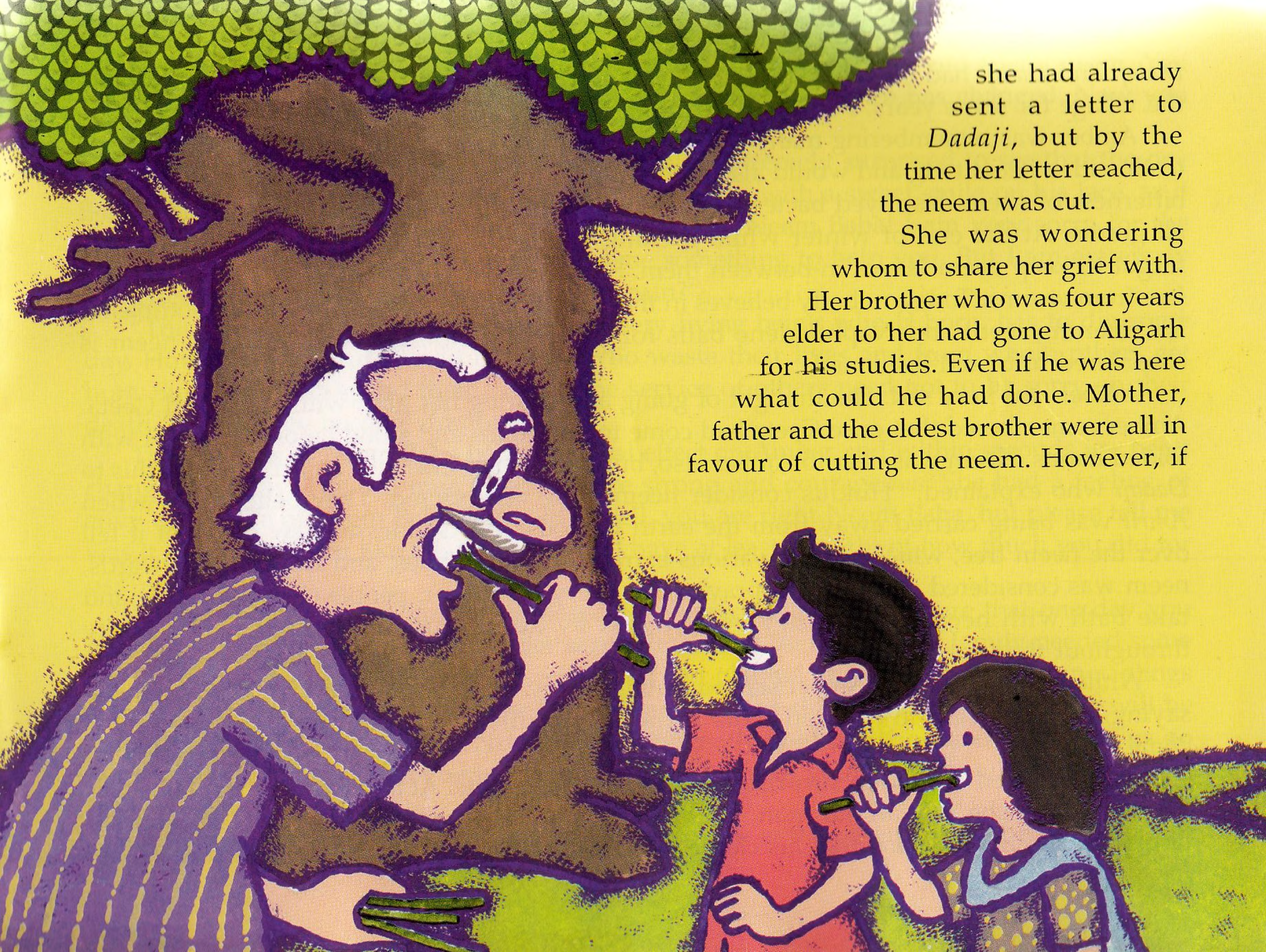
Amber was very disheartened; due to which she did not even eat her lunch. She again came to the courtyard of her house and kept standing near the place silently, where once the neem was. Then, she moved to the branch lying in the corner. For some time, she caressed it and suddenly lied down there. Although, it was just a branch of tree but it gave her peace.

Some time later, Amber started thinking. She recalled the discussions, which were going on in the house for long. Her mother, father and the eldest brother wanted to remove the neem tree as it was unnecessarily occupying a large area. They wanted to build a room in its place so that they could convert the room adjacent to the outer verandah into a drawing room.

Amber was a very calm girl and was considered too small to be allowed to take part in any family discussion. Therefore, she could not interfere in the decision of her family. Several times she thought of contacting her elder brother in Aligarh or *Dadaji* in the village. In fact,

she had already sent a letter to *Dadaji*, but by the time her letter reached, the neem was cut.

She was wondering whom to share her grief with. Her brother who was four years elder to her had gone to Aligarh for his studies. Even if he was here what could he have done. Mother, father and the eldest brother were all in favour of cutting the neem. However, if



Dadaji and *Dadiji* had been here, surely they would have saved the neem. But they lived in the village for some years. Perhaps they did not receive her letter in time.

Amber was remembering many things one after another. *Dadaji* would always clean his teeth with a neem twig and would also advise others to do the same. He used to say that the bitterness of neem destroyed bacteria in the mouth and its little juice in the stomach killed all germs. At the end of winter while packing up the woollens, her grandmother never forgot to keep neem leaves in-between them. She said that neem leaves would keep them free from worms. Today, nobody believes in these methods. People rely on costly toothpastes for cleaning teeth and Naphthalene balls for protecting clothes. Whoever uses neem is considered to be old-fashioned.

Amber was very sad. She thought of going and sharing her grief with her friend Geeta. Amber remembered that once Geeta had come to her house and stood before the neem with folded hands. Neem was dear to Amber also, but she did not like such an act. She told this to *Dadaji* who explained, "Hindus consider neem to be very sacred. They believe that when *Amrit* was being carried away from the earth to Gods and Goddesses, few drops of it fell over the neem tree, which gave it various extraordinary qualities, and from then onwards, neem was considered a tree worth praying to. Every New Year, people chew its leaves and take bath with neem water. They believe that by doing this they will remain healthy throughout the year."

While thinking all this, Amber started feeling sleepy. In the meantime, she heard someone saying, "Good girl, don't be sad. This is the way of life. One goes away and the others come."

Amber looked around in surprise, but did not see anyone. At a distance where once was the neem tree, she saw an old man. He had silver white beard and hair, and, an innocent face. It was rather amazing that his clothes were made of neem leaves. He looked at Amber

and said, "Dear Amber, you perhaps didn't recognise me. I am your old friend neem. You played and grew under my shade. After being cut, my appearance has changed. Now you may call me 'Neem Baba'."

Amber got up and went closer to him. She was extremely surprised to see that the one who was cut into many pieces was standing before her with a sweet smile on his face, as if nothing had happened. On seeing this, Amber said, "Neem Baba! I am very sorry for the cruelty done to you. I wish, I could have done something to help you. But I am extremely surprised to see you so calm. Are you not in pain?"

"This is not a matter of sorrow at all. Every living being who is born, has to die some day. However, regretful should be those who waste their lives and from whom others get hurt. But those who spend their lives in the service of others need not to be sorry on their death. In fact, they become immortal."

These words of Neem Baba had a magical effect on Amber and within seconds her heart changed entirely. The old man's views were strong and courageous. She had a feeling of envy on the life of Neem Baba. She said, "Well, you are right Neem Baba, but please tell me was it right to cut you like this? They should have at least thought of how much you did for us?"

"Good girl, I am very much impressed by your intelligence and sure that one day you will achieve greater heights and render service to others. Actually your family needed some space, so they chopped me off. But I wish they had planted at least two new neem saplings somewhere else before chopping me. If trees are cut like this, the human life itself will be endangered." After saying this, Neem Baba very gently held her hand and said, "Let us go out in the park. You will feel better there and I will also tell you my story which might be of interest to you."

They reached the park. There was an old neem tree at the other side of the park. Both of

them sat on the green grass in front of the tree. Now, Amber was feeling much better. She inhaled the fresh air and said, "Neem Baba, tell me your story."

"My story is very old. I don't remember exactly, but I took birth on the earth millions of years ago. In those days, the atmosphere was very clean. Thick forests occupied large land area. Man had not yet born and there was no fear of being cut or burnt. Within a short period of time my seeds spread widely and I enormously increased in numbers."

"Neem Baba, which part of the world were you born?" Asked Amber.

"It is difficult to tell you exactly, because the land was not divided into different countries as it is now. But as far as I remember, I was born somewhere in today's Myanmar or some



northern part of India. We can say that it is where the Shivalik Mountains exist. But within a short time my fraternity spread from one corner of India to another. It was really encouraging to see my offspring in such a great number that I even extended my roots beyond India."

"But Neem Baba, every country has its own climate which could be different from that of India. Some parts are cooler while others warmer. Under such different conditions how did your offspring survive at other regions?" Amber asked curiously.


"Dear Amber, India is a vast country with varied climatic conditions. Once I was acclimatised here, I became confident to establish myself in other parts as well. Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan were very similar to India, but my offspring did not



face any difficulty even in countries like Iran, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Sudan and Nigeria. When human beings appeared and started moving from one place to another, I reached with them to African countries also. Now I am well established—from Somalia in the east to Mauritania in the west. Besides, my offspring have reached Fiji and Northern Islands, Trinidad and West Indies, and even in Central and Northern America. You will be amazed to know that about 50,000 neem trees have been planted in Arafat, at Mecca, to provide shade to the *Hajis* during the *Haj* pilgrimage.” Neem Baba explained in detail.

“Really, your courage and confidence must be appreciated, as you





have occupied such a vast area of this land. Please also tell me who gave you this sweet and small name 'Neem'." Asked Amber.

"The story of my name is also very interesting. India is my birthplace. The names given to me by the people of India were very sweet. They called me *Arishta*, *Nimba* and *Nimbaca* from the Sanskrit language. Out of these names, *Arishta* is the oldest, which means the one who cures diseases. After India, my first stop was Myanmar, where the Burmese called me *Tamaca*. Afterwards, various names were given to me. Now, I have so many names that I myself can't remember them, but the name which most people are familiar with is 'Neem', given by the Iranian people," answered Neem Baba.



Amber said, "It's very strange! I thought neem is a Hindi word."

"In Hindi, my name is *Nimb*. I have been given several names in Indian languages and all have an influence of Hindi or Sanskrit. For instance, in Asamiya, Bangla, Punjabi and Konkani, my name is *Nim*. I am called *Leemba* in Gujarati, *Nimori* in Sindhi, *Nimbamond* in Telugu, *Nimbe* in Marathi and *Nimo* in Oriya. However, Urdu language has only adopted 'Neem'. Apart from all these names, I also have a scientific name. My local names can confuse people but never my scientific name. For this, I am thankful to the Muslim rulers."

"Why are you thankful to them?" asked Amber.

"When the Muslim rulers came to India, they saw that a common tree of their country was freely growing here in India. Then, they started calling us *Azad Darakhte Hindi*. Later, when different plants and animals were given scientific names in the then scientific language, Latin, my name became *Azadirachta indica*. This is now my international name by which I am easily recognised throughout the world."

"Neem Baba, you are really very fortunate to be so well-known all over the world," praised Amber.

"Dear Amber, names are always associated with deeds. There are so many trees and plants about which nobody knows anything. But people derive benefits from us and that is why they know us well. As people are getting more and more knowledge about me, I am becoming more important in their lives. Today, people call us by such names that bring us a lot of pride."

"Neem Baba, tell me about those names please." Amber requested.

"These names are in fact, honour given by the scientists world over to us for our qualities. These include 'best of the best trees', 'bitter grace of god', 'nature's gift to man', 'beneficial tree for every occasion' and 'cleanliness-parting tree'. Some admirers have even called us 'magic tree' and 'a tree of the twentieth century.'"

"This means Neem Baba that human beings not only clean their teeth or protect clothes but derive many other benefits from you. Would you please tell me something about that?"

"Sure dear girl. You will realise my real importance only after hearing my other qualities and will definitely appreciate the importance of the man too.

"How is man important?" asked Amber.

"Look Amber, God has given me innumerable beneficial qualities, but tell me who has discovered these. It is the man. So, if we are great, then, who discovered our qualities, will be considered great too."

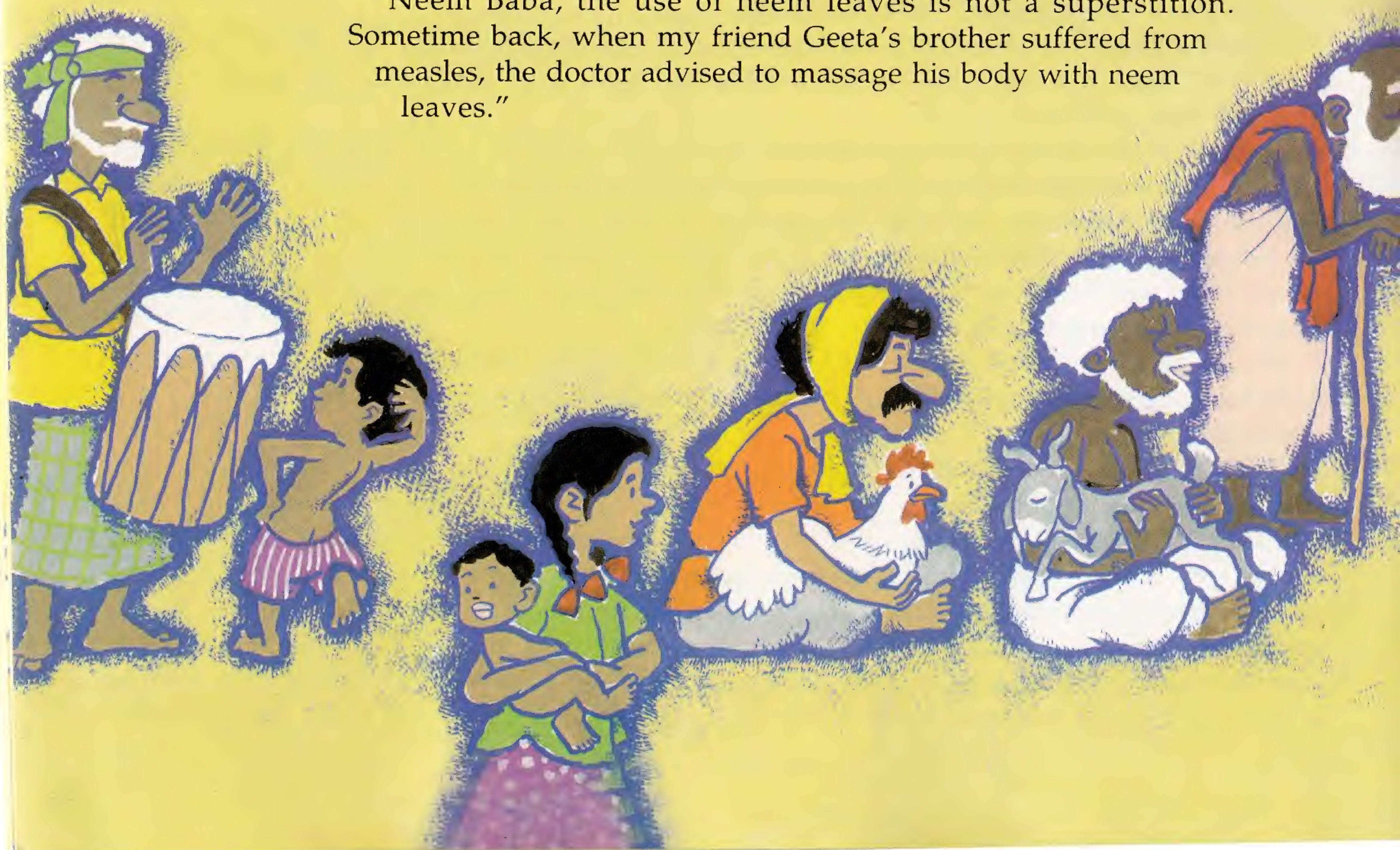
Amber nodded her head in agreement and got ready to listen to the neem's achievements. Neem Baba continued further. "There was a time when neither we nor human beings were aware of our properties. But with the passage of time, they gradually realised that Neem had properties by which diseases were cured, mental illness was handled and people living around us became healthier. Such experience, on the one hand, made some people superstitious while developed interest in others to do research."

On hearing this, Amber recalled Geeta's act. Now, she realised that despite scientific developments, some people still suffer from superstitions and sometimes consider neem as a part of religion.

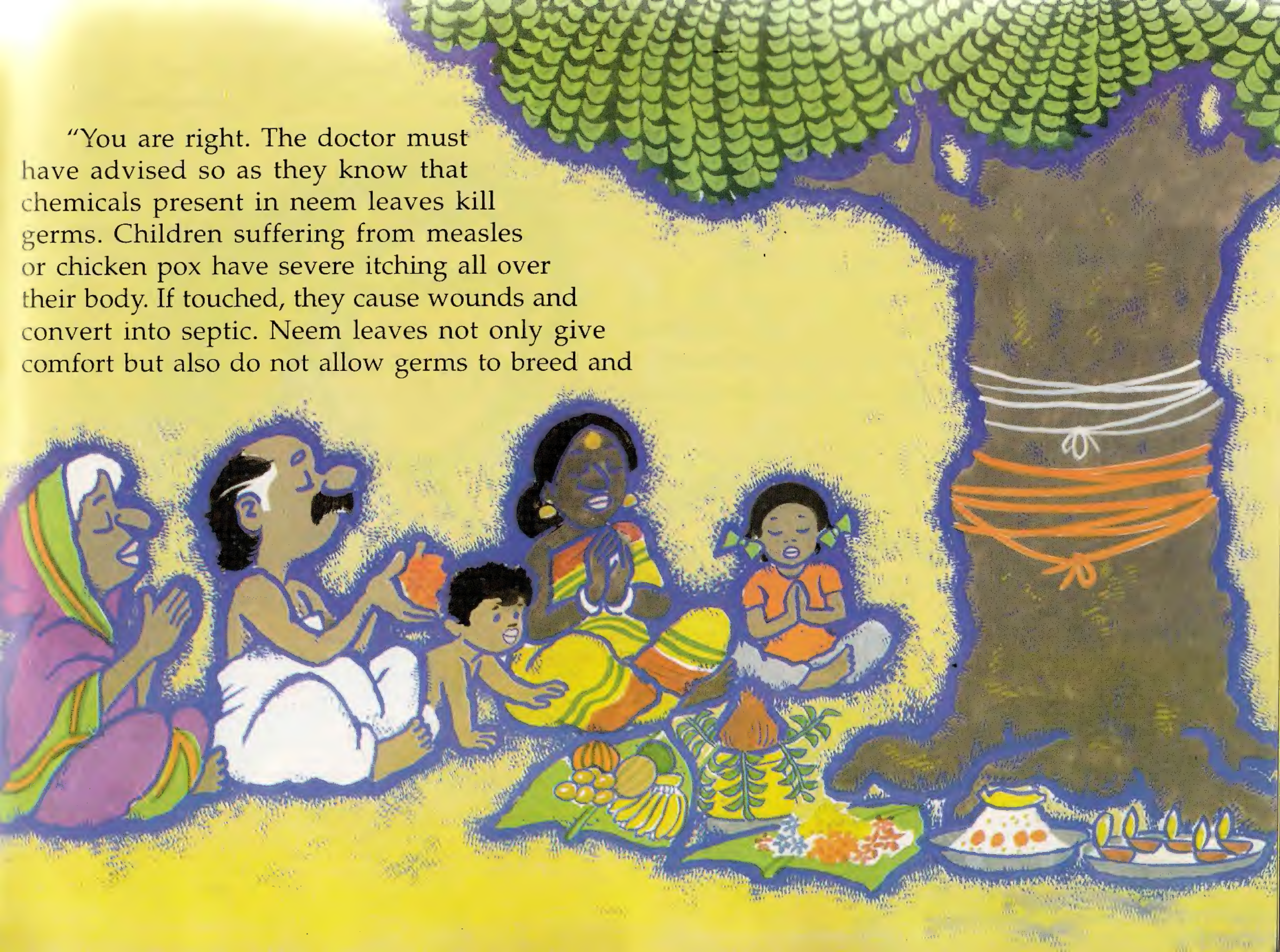
Neem Baba pointed his hand towards the old neem tree and said, "Can you see that hollow space in that tree? This is created when the tree trunk divides at the base and meets at the top. It is said that if mentally disabled people are allowed to pass through such a hollow, they will be cured. Similarly, in Karnataka, there exist a tribe called 'Koramaz', who pray to neem in a strange manner. They make collections and buy a brass vessel. In the vessel, they keep coconut and neem leaves, put some flowers and sandal-water is sprinkled. After this, the vessel is kept at a shaded place for three days. During this period, people sacrifice goats and chickens in the name of a daughter of Shiva and enjoy grand feasts.

Afterwards, the vessel is thrown into the water. Similar ceremonies are performed in other parts of India too and are called 'Khatus Thapan'. People believe that through this, they can get rid of diseases and misfortunes. Some people also think that several fatal diseases can be cured by the breeze of neem leaves."

"Neem Baba, the use of neem leaves is not a superstition. Sometime back, when my friend Geeta's brother suffered from measles, the doctor advised to massage his body with neem leaves."



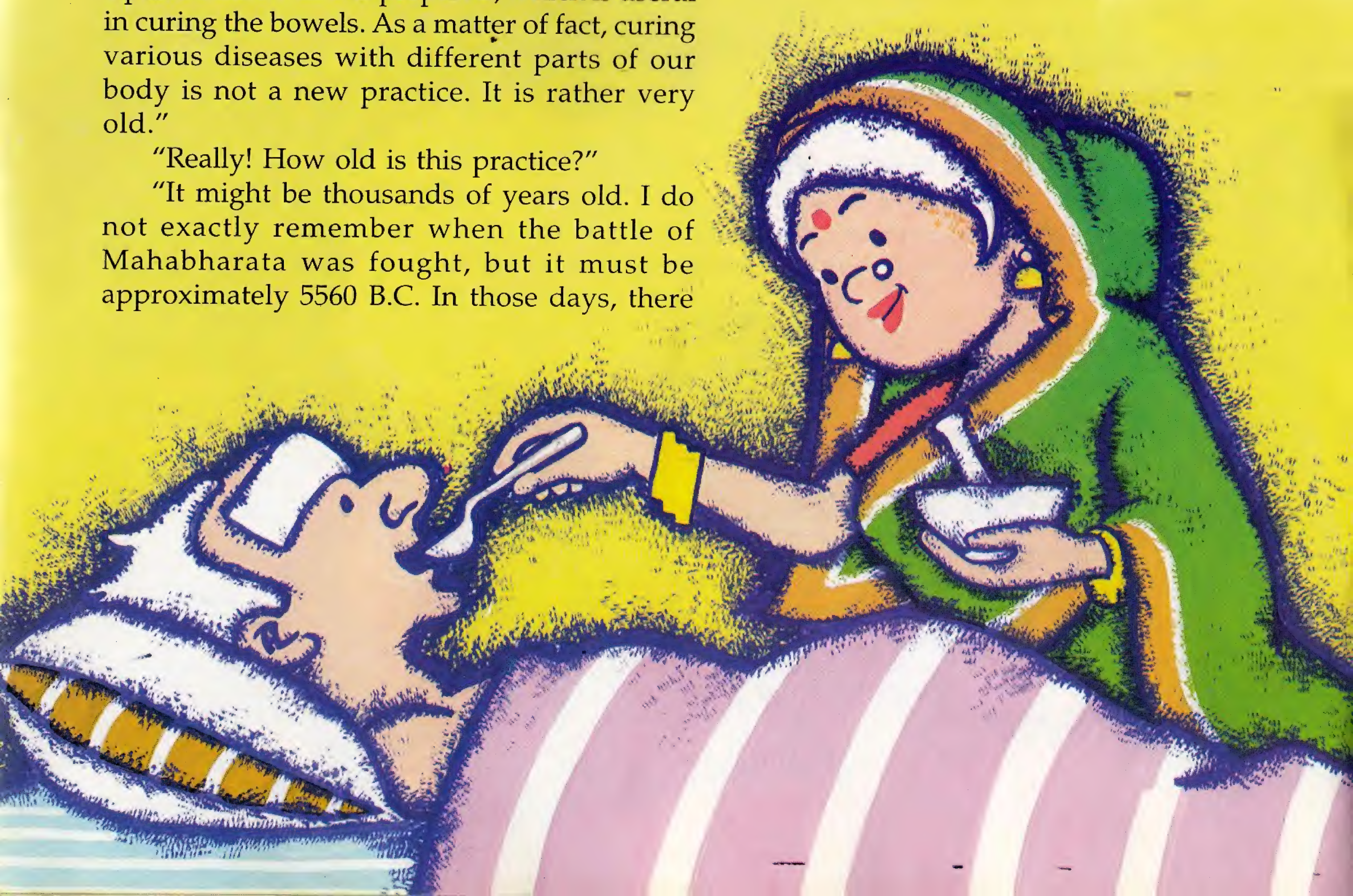
“You are right. The doctor must have advised so as they know that chemicals present in neem leaves kill germs. Children suffering from measles or chicken pox have severe itching all over their body. If touched, they cause wounds and convert into septic. Neem leaves not only give comfort but also do not allow germs to breed and



the wounds to fester. By grinding neem leaves, a paste called *Pultis* is prepared, which is useful in curing the bowels. As a matter of fact, curing various diseases with different parts of our body is not a new practice. It is rather very old."

"Really! How old is this practice?"

"It might be thousands of years old. I do not exactly remember when the battle of Mahabharata was fought, but it must be approximately 5560 B.C. In those days, there



were two *Pandavas*, named Nakul and Sahadev. They were called doctor (*vaidya*) of cattles. In old books of Sanskrit and Tamil, it is written that neem used to be an essential element of most medicines. Doctors then used neem as leaf or nobolie powder or in the form of oil. The cattle-diseases cured by us included hectic fever, leprosy, problems of eyes and ears, cough, obesity, constipation, dysentery, stomach worms, problems of milk and even gut cancer. The prescriptions of old Indian *vaidya* and *hakeems* commonly had neem leaves, bark, flowers, nobolies and even roots."

Neem Baba continued further and said.

"It is written in the Atharva Veda, the religious book of Hindus, that neem is extremely useful in any sudden illness. In the Puranas, neem is considered to be useful for treating leprosy. Famous *hakeems* and *vaidya* namely Charak Sarrota, Preeta Sakrapani, Bhava Mishra (1600), Hakim Ali Jilani (1554-1609), Hakim Sharif Khan (1725-1807) and Hakim Abdul Halim (1948) have considered neem useful for innumerable diseases like leprosy, eczema, urine problems, diabetes, arthritis, jaundice, pimples and skin diseases. Hakim Ali Jilani was so impressed by the qualities of the neem that he gave it the title '*mubarak tree*'."

"That's true, any tree having so many qualities must be called '*mubarak tree*'. Neem Baba, I myself saw the use of your bark and flowers. Shall I tell you about that?"

"Surely, but where have you seen it?"

"In my own house. Some years ago, I suffered from severe cough. Everybody felt that it was whooping cough. Various methods were tried on me, but there was no change. While coughing, I used to feel suffocated. Finally, my grandmother cured me. She took some neem bark and kept it in a mud vessel. This was covered and kept in the fire for the whole night. In the morning, the bark had turned into the ash. This ash was mixed with honey and given to me and I was cured."

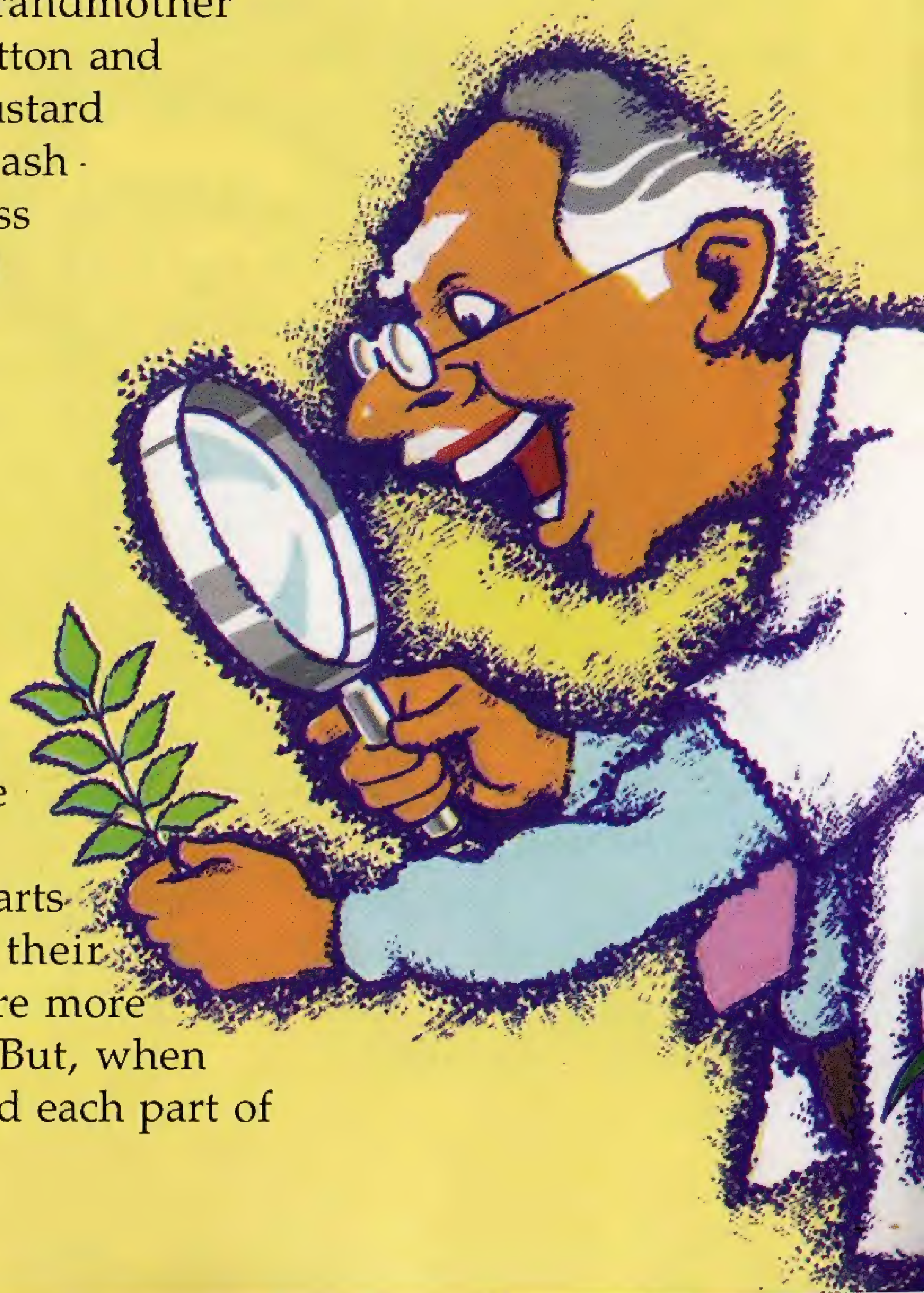
"And how about those flowers?" asked Neem Baba.

"Once my brother had sore eyes. There was much irritation and itching in the eyes. He rubbed them to such an extent that the eyes became blood red. Even his eyelashes were shedding. Then, my grandmother prepared a *kajal*. She wrapped some flowers in cotton and made a long thread out of it. This was dipped in mustard oil and lit in lamp. When completely burnt, the ash was mixed with alum and butter, and put in a brass bowl. It then was rubbed with neem stick, and when this *kajal* was applied, my brother was completely cured and his eyelashes grew."

Neem Baba felt very happy after listening to his qualities from a small girl. He said laughingly, "Oh, little Amber, you have become almost a *hakeem*."

"Neem Baba, whatever I know has been told to me by my grandmother. Please let me know that when *hakeems* and *vaidya* already knew so much about you then what more could be added by the scientists."

"Well, *hakeems* and *vaidya* were using different parts of neem for different diseases on the basis of their experiences. The result was that, at times they were more useful while on other occasions had little effect. But, when scientists started working on neem, they researched each part of



my body and discovered which part was actually effective for which disease and in how much quantity."

"In what way this could be useful?"

"Establishing that a particular ingredient is beneficial for a particular disease was a big achievement. Suppose, control of sugar in blood is possible only with my new buds, then, there is no need to try with any other part for the disease."

"Those persons deserve full appreciation who first discovered your qualities."

"Yes, you are right. When scientists found the qualities of my different parts, then only, people started using neem correctly. Human beings had some experiences also, which enabled them utilise neem for several fatal diseases."

"Please let me know which were those experiences." Asked Amber.

Neem Baba smiled and said, "Little girl, I really feel very happy talking to you. At such a small age your interest in such matters clearly indicates that one day you will become a famous scientist. Before telling you some other things, I would like to know if you have ever seen a locust?"

"Neem Baba, I have not seen them, but I have certainly learnt many things from my teacher and have also seen their pictures. These are a kind of insects. They live in swarm and whenever a swarm reaches a field, they eat up the entire crop. There was a time when these locusts were uncontrollable and responsible for causing famines in large areas."

"I am happy, you know a lot about them. It was during 1888-94, when an Algerian scientist observed that when a swarm of locust came, they passed through neem trees. After this, Gristoff and Monn, in 1913 and Baran in 1927 observed that locusts do not eat our leaves. Similar was the experience of Professor Ishmatreir of Sudan in 1959. But an Indian scientist, Dr S. Pradhan, proved this

fact for the first time. He in 1962 proved that if dry nobolies' powder mixed in water is sprayed on plants and trees, then locusts would never eat them, even if they are dying with hunger. It was later revealed that in my seeds there are two chemicals, Meliantrol and Azadrachti, which prevent locusts from eating neem."

"This is an excellent discovery." Praised Amber.

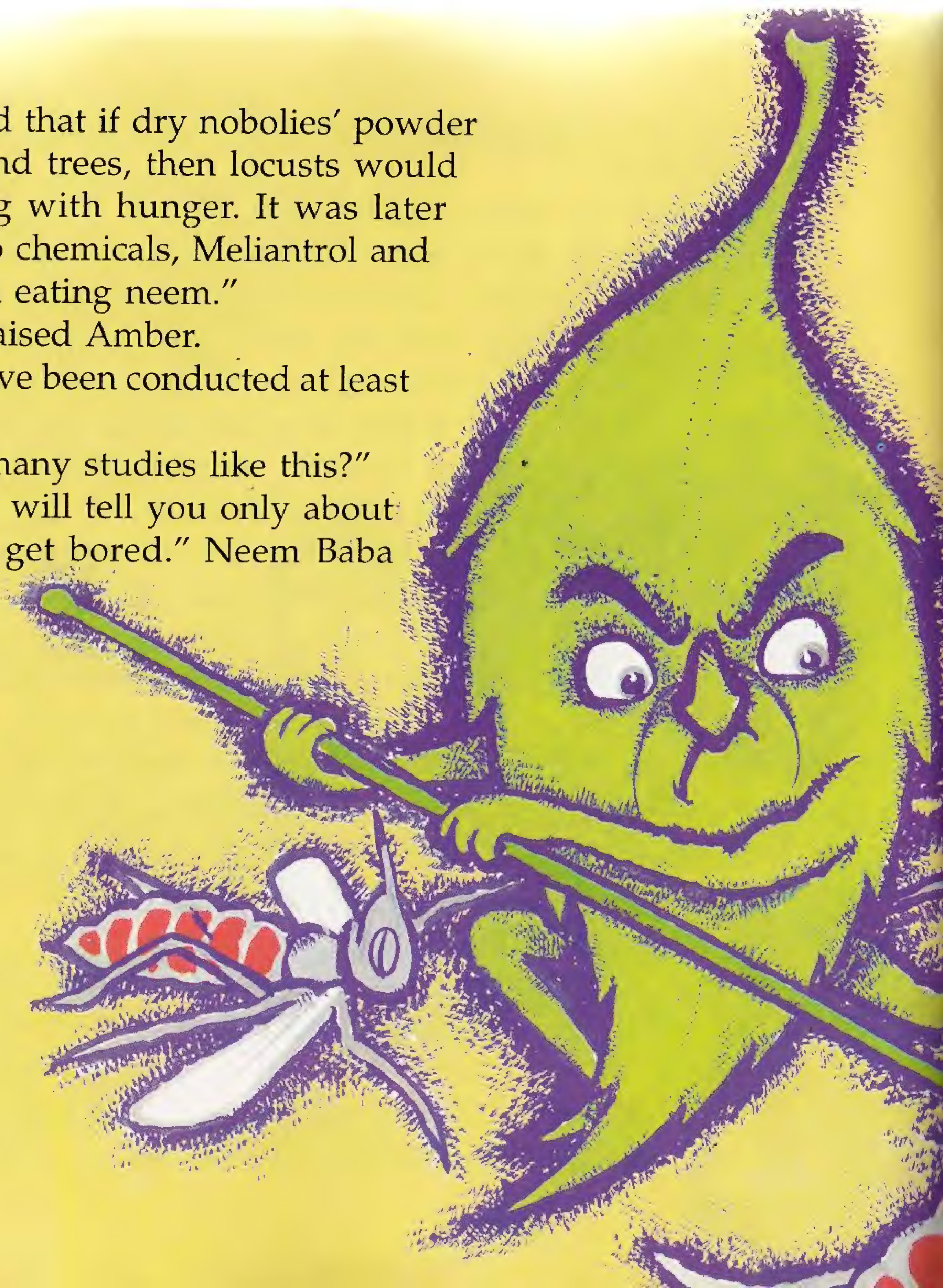
"Yes, and since then, experiments have been conducted at least on 250 other insect species also."

"Neem Baba, have scientists done many studies like this?"

"Yes, they did. But at the moment I will tell you only about few of them because I fear you might get bored." Neem Baba said with a smile on his face.

"There is no reason of getting bored. I am rather enjoying talking to you. You have provided me a lot of useful information. Tell me more about other achievements."

"Amber, you know that mosquitoes breed in standing water. One day, some people were surprised to see that there were no mosquitoes breeding in a pit. When it was investigated it was revealed that the water had essence of neem seeds, which had fallen into the pit.



The chemical present in seeds was preventing mosquito from breeding and even their larvae had died. Still more interesting was the fact that neem oil was poisonous for mosquitoes but harmless for their predators such as frogs and fishes."

"This method appears to be cheapest."

"To a great extent you are correct. A neem tree normally yields about 30-100 kg of nobolies. From 30 kg nobolies, 6 kg oil and 24 kg oil cake can be obtained. This oil is required in a very small quantity and two handful of nobolie powder is sufficient in 10 litres of water. Later, researchers revealed that chemicals present in oil not only prevent insect attack but also help to kill them or stop their multiplication."

"Is the nobolies' cake obtained from the seeds also useful?"

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"Nobolies' cake act as a fertilizer. If used in rice field, where water remains standing, it not only stops mosquito breeding but helps to increase crop yield also. It is a preventive measure for the termites, which eat roots of the crop, and it also stops breeding of crop eating insects, which might be present in those fields."

"Neem Baba, you are really great. It is surprising to see that a single tree can have so many qualities."

"I have told you only a few of them. People save their stored grains from insects by applying neem oil or by adding seed powder to them. A chemical extracted from the neem bark is used in the industry of tanning leather. As neem oil kills germs, it is also used in making soaps. A chemical present in the neem oil is called Nibedene, which is used in the preparation of toothpaste and is useful for gums. Furniture made out of neem wood remains free from termite attack. Above all, neem has high content of oxygen and hence plays a great role in purifying the air."

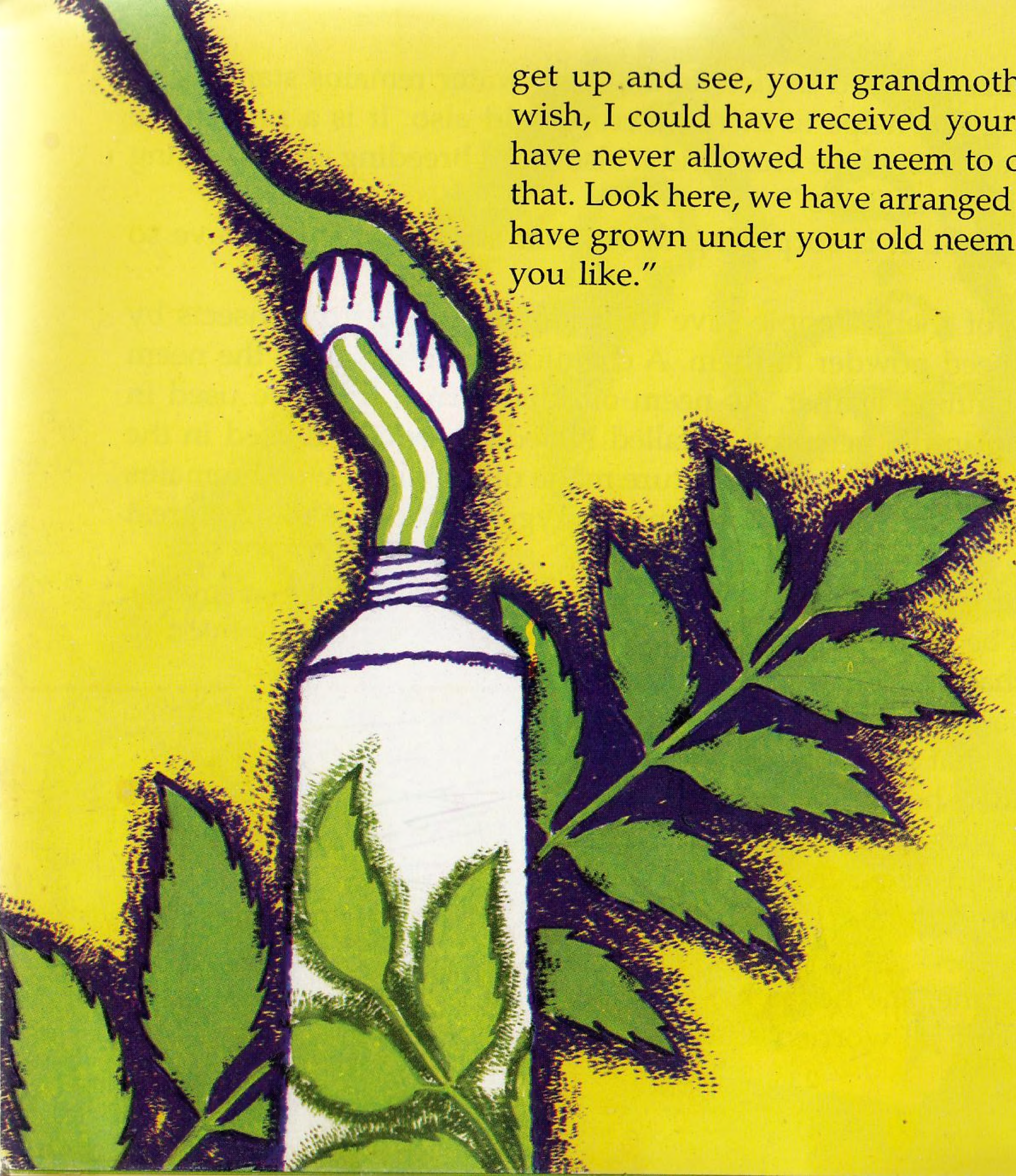
After a pause, Neem Baba further said, "Dear Amber, these are some of my achievements. There are yet many qualities to be still discovered. These qualities are waiting for you to grow up and discover them so that they are known by your name."

After telling this, Neem Baba got up. He affectionately put his hand on Amber's head and said, "Would you like that future discoveries are known by your name?"

Amber happily nodded her head.

Then, Neem Baba wished her long life, said *Khuda Hafiz* to her and started moving towards the old neem tree. Slowly, he moved farther and farther and ultimately disappeared. Amber raised her hand and said *Khuda Hafiz* to Neem Baba.

In the meantime, she heard her *Dadaji's* voice. "Amber, Amber where were you? We were all worried about you and you are sleeping here. Now



get up and see, your grandmother is very anxious to meet you. I wish, I could have received your letter earlier, then surely, I would have never allowed the neem to cut. Anyway, now you forget about that. Look here, we have arranged for you these neem saplings, which have grown under your old neem tree. You can plant them wherever you like."

Whether it was the presence of *Dadaji* or the conversation with Neem Baba that Amber felt peace and happiness. Amber looked at *Dadaji* with a smile, caught hold of the neem saplings and got up to plant them.

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